An Irish Mother's Legacy

by Patricia LeSage Cockburn

L'auteure nous parle de sa mère et des valeurs traditionnelles héritées d'elle.

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Today is my fifty-sixth birthday. I went to the graveyard after Mass and watered the pink geranium and yellow petunias at my mother's head-stone. It is a beautiful, warm June 29th, just like the day 56 years ago when the bells were ringing, the birds were singing, the sun was shining—and I was born. My mother told me about that day. It was amazing she remembered it so well, considering that I was the ninth child born to her—three more to come after me.

My mother is alive to me today. Her legacy of Irishness has found a home in me. Little did her dad, John Murphy, know in the year 1869 when he was ten, sitting on an old wagon making its laboured way from Kingston to the untamed lands north of Tweed, that he would sire seven children, 27 grandchildren, and many more great-grandchildren in this forbidding land. John cried as he came over that bumpy rock-strewn path, huddled with his brother and sisters on that cold and windy spring day. He missed the turf bogs of Carlow and these plain blue Canadian skies were nothing compared to the changeable, full and water-heavy purplish, black, and grey clouds of his native Ireland. He missed his home.

Is that what compelled my mother to be searching for that missing piece all her life? Even when she married a stalwart lad, Ernest Alexander LeSage, the oldest offspring from good French Canadian stock? Even when she made a home, worked hard, birthed her children easily, and as the story goes, had her last child so quick and easy that she was plucking chickens, laughing and joking up to the very moment that Bobby was born.

When I think of the Irish legacy in my geographical area, this town of Tweed and beyond, in Hungerford Township, where most of my aunts and uncles lived on farms, I think of my mother, Mary Patricia Murphy. She gave us the gift—or the curse, I don't know which—of always expecting the unexpected. She liked to throw a monkey-wrench, or was it a well-tossed and well-timed *shillelagh*[1] into the normalities of everyday life. You never knew what she was going to say or do. If she felt like it, she could rise to any occasion. Once there was a car accident near our house and she took the accident victims in (one was her sister) and nursed them back to health. I remember our living room lined with beds. That same sister-in-law's husband (an assistant deputy minister of education), received the silent treatment for years. Although not true, she believed that he had failed to fight hard enough to keep the local high school open in 1970.

Yes, my mother had an Irish way with her and people say that as long as I'm alive she will not die. For today, my fey and word-reckless mother lives in me.

It is my birthday. My daughter has not acknowledged it. "Why didn't you say Happy Birthday?" I ask. When she replies off-handedly that she forgot, sharp words flow from me in a torrent. With both of us crying, I went to my land.

Yes, another Irish legacy: a few acres on the Marlbank Road. But more than that, a place to cry, a place to hold my ancient bones and heart. A place where a hundred years ago the Flynn's piled rock upon rock for the fences, and tried to make smaller the newly-claimed bramble and prickly ash wilderness. There I feel at home. Another wild place, settled by the Irish of long ago, who had kept a spot for me. The road abutting this land is the same wagon path that had delivered my grandfather, John, to his foreign home, generations previously.

There are daisies, clover, buttercups, another kind of yellow flower, and a dainty white one that I pick. As I walk from bramble to bramble I think of the ones who came before and what they went through. I think of my dear daughter who forgot my birthday, but who has a tender and vulnerable heart. And I think of my mother, who sprang from a Murphy-Cassidy union, who had a romantic heart and a wild one. She always expected us to recognize her on Mother's Day and on her birthday and when we sometimes didn't, she would be hurt beyond all our understanding.

I think it was the Celtic wildness of Ireland she missed, the light-hearted repartee she was so good at, the thrust and parry of the silver tongues that were there in her dad's homeplace of Carlow. I think her genes were crying out for a mystical life, the one she left behind in Ireland.

Here in Tweed, in Canada, she passed on to us a wounded heart, a heart punctured with imagined and real slights, yet a heart easily opened for a good reason or for no reason at all. How proud I was of her many years ago when she gave one of my Dad's shirts away to my

boyfriend, a Nigerian. In 1966 for an Irish Catholic to welcome a Nigerian into her family was quite remarkable.

So I ask myself today whether I have learned too late the lessons and legacy of my wild Irish mother. Have I learned too late that though she and I need words for recognition, there are those to whom the heart has no tongues and their hearts are true and good—like my daughter's? Have I learned too late that my mother had an appreciation for the reality that was hidden, and could address it in her own way. The motto for Murphy is brace and hospitable; perhaps foolhardy should be added to that. She did not pick or choose her fights; life was one long battle and whether she laughed or cried she was in it all the way. A redhead till she died in 1976, today I marvel at her quixotic manner and bless her for the blood which courses through my veins.

Postscript: On September 13th, 1997, I went to the funeral of Monica, my mother's sister. While standing at the gravesite, my whole family got a great chuckle. At the base of Mother's tombstone, next to Monica's, growing in splendid lively green, were three healthy tomato plants. Where we had planted flowers with liberal sprinklings of compost, tomatoes had sprung up. Thanks, Mom.

Patricia LeSage Cockburn is the mother of a 21-year-old boy and a 19-year-old daughter. In the summer of 1996 she went to Belfast to work for Habitat for Humanity and found that digging ditches made her as happy as she's ever been.

[1]A *shilleagh* is a stout cudget, made of oak or blackthorn.

SHEILA STEWART

The Ladies and the Bomb

The Royal Doulton figurines standing on the
mantlepiece aren't touched by the bomb explod-
ing outside. The policeman and his family who
live across the street are away in Spain. On
television in Costa del Sol they see their house is
destroyed. Not an ash falls on the white skin,
coiffured hair, or ruffled dresses of the ladies.
The one in the yellow dress tilts her head to the
left, her hand brushes her cheek. The one in the
green pinafore and matching hat lifts her skirt to
reveal her many petticoats. She raises her eyes
demurely as the front window shatters.

Sheila Stewart's poetry is forthcoming in A Room at the Heart of Things, *edited by Elisabeth Harvor (Véhicule Press). She is currently a literacy worker living in Toronto. This poem first appeared in* WRIT.

LESLIE FINE

The Widow's Progress

Life and dreams once fully shared
forever gone.
Alone in home.
Shadowed echoes of memories.
She flounders to rebuild her world,
knowing it can never be the same.

Nerves frayed from months of nursing,
him, with battered brain suffering
ordeals of its malignant tumour.
Barely leaving bed-side.
Her sleep, short naps of release,
in fear she might miss a lucid moment.

Support at hand by saddened ones,
yet oblivious of their being.
Focussed fully on him, hoping her love
can redirect persistent fate.

Last breath once drawn, she covers his body
with warmth drawn from her, clinging
in hope to prolong dying days of summer.

Drugs now required to haze
the emptiness of her bed.

Slowly she tackles hurdles of loneliness.
Tears creep to corner of eyes
which she tries to conceal from others
who know the depths of her chasm.

A new pattern has to be cut
for garments to fit days ahead.
Points on compass have changed
to fresh directions, strange and unknown.
Areas she would never chosen to explore.

Self-sufficiency is slow to form.
She will survive granted time.
The great provider.

Leslie Fine started creative writing in 1993 and has been published in three anthologies in England, as well as in the White Wall Review.